

# **MEMBER ALERT**



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## **HIGH WATER PREPAREDNESS IN US RIVERS**

Along with the welcome blossoms and moderate temperatures, springtime inevitably brings forth months of snowmelt, heavy rains and threats of strong-to-severe winds and storms in the US.

In most years, high water in the lower Mississippi River, has peaked and begins to fall by June. However, 2019 was not like most years. The winter and spring of 2019 saw major flooding in the US Midwest, particularly on the Missouri River and its tributaries. These waters eventually found their way to the lower Mississippi River where already higher than usual water levels were reported in the New Orleans area. Levels were still elevated in July 2019 when Hurricane Barry moved into the Gulf of Mexico and threatened to compound the situation with storm surge, which could have been devastating. In the result, water levels and flood risks remained high in the river and its tributaries through August 2019.

Although conditions are not as severe as they were in 2019, the Mississippi River is high, and flood risk remains a serious concern for 2020 also. As of February 28, the Mississippi River had already exceeded the monitoring threshold of 15 feet (4.6 meters) for 21 days, compared with 16 days by the same date in 2019. Experts have predicted that the US will experience frequent and widespread precipitation, and cooler temperatures, than usual well into June this year. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)'s National Weather Service expects the spring flood risk to remain higher than normal for the upper and lower Mississippi and tributary rivers.

High-water conditions in the Mississippi River result in whipping currents, the formation of unpredictable eddies, and other hydrodynamic changes. In an already meandering river, these intensified water patterns present even greater risks to vessels.

Vulnerabilities of vessels in regard to flood risk in the Mississippi River were readily apparent last year, when your Managers observed a surge of “contact damage” related incidents (i.e. collisions, groundings and damage to third party property). These high-water levels create a host of problems for vessels, including:

- Unexpected draft restrictions causing delays of two or even three weeks for deep draft vessels when channel dredging is required.
- Daylight only navigation restrictions in some areas.

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- Damage to anchor windlasses or loss of anchors, which often “dig” deep into the soft mud as vessels are impacted by the strong current.
- Standby tugs and 24-hour on-board pilotage at certain berths and midstream buoy facilities

General navigation, docking, and anchoring can be further complicated by exceptionally swift currents (reaching 6 to 7 knots in some areas), increased shoaling, and the rapid formation and dissipation of eddies. Such conditions may cause vessels to shift and drag anchor or anchors getting buried and stuck by the sediment deposited by the strong currents.

The industry relies heavily on the knowledge and experience of river captains to know every bend of the river and how it behaves and reacts to the dynamic weather conditions. When transiting through these areas, a river captain’s experience and knowledge are essential and heavily relied upon to ensure safe navigation. The US Coast Guard Captain of the Port of New Orleans expects vessels, facilities, and vessel agents planning a vessel movement of any sort, to consult with the appropriate pilot associations to determine whether a pilot and/or tugs are necessary for the intended shift. In addition, your Managers recommend the below actions are also followed:

- Consult the US Coast Guard, class, manufacturer or internal company policies to determine a suitable towing vessel horsepower to barge tonnage ratio, considering weather conditions, currents and other maneuverability factors, if and as necessary.
- Utilize a vetted and experienced captain and consider their mental and physical fatigue prior to the voyage.
- Take all proper precautions to best anticipate river conditions, weather, the area of transit, and the pilot’s level of comfort when arranging the number of barges in tow.
- Report and share up-to-date information with the company or industry safety associations regarding any observed collisions, allisions, near misses, or navigation troubles in frequently transited areas to generate awareness and establish best practices.
- Pay extra attention to traffic in the area and use all available means of navigational information available, i.e. VHF radios, radar, AIS, and VTS as applicable.

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- Avoid all unnecessary distractions like cell phones calls and texts to the captain or pilot on duty.
- Discuss the prevailing conditions with the river pilot prior to commencing the shifting and carefully monitor the vessel's movement during the transit.
- Review procedures for anchoring and monitoring anchor position and pay particular attention to the condition and maintenance of anchoring equipment.

Finally, the following resources provide additional useful information for Members' consideration:

1. **Providing water levels of rivers and lakes:** US Army Corps of Engineers at <https://rivergages.mvr.usace.army.mil/WaterControl/new/layout.cfm>
2. **US Geological Survey water data for the nation:** National Water Information System Web Interface at <https://waterdata.usgs.gov/nwis/rt>
3. **Accurate, reliable, and timely tides, water levels, currents, and other coastal oceanographic and meteorological information:** NOAA tides and currents <https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/ports/index.html?port=lm>
4. **Mississippi River Tracking and Information System:** Widely used Mississippi River subscription-based service providing vessel particulars, ETA's, live cameras, live weather, text & voice alerts, survey data and mobile interface at <http://mrtis.com/>
5. **US Coast Guard resources:**
  - i) 33 CFR § 165.810 - Mississippi River, LA-regulated navigation area prescribes rules for all vessels operating in the Lower Mississippi River below mile 233.9 above Head of Passes including South Pass and Southwest Pass.
  - ii) SCG Marine Safety Information Bulletins (MSIBs) provide the most up-to-date instructions and restrictions within the sector, including High Water Safety Advisories. <https://www.dco.uscg.mil/Featured-Content/Mariners/Marine-Safety-Information-Bulletins-MSIB/>
  - iii) Coast Guard Vessel Traffic Service Lower Mississippi River (24 hours): (504) 365-2230, VHF-FM Ch. 05A, 12  
Coast Guard Sector New Orleans Command Center (24 hours): (504) 365-2543  
Coast Guard Sector New Orleans Waterways Management: (504) 365-2280